

The Clipper Visits...Polly Litchfield

By MARTHA HIMES

When some people get frustrated, they sit around and complain. Others take action. Polly Litchfield falls into the latter category. The challenges of raising a mentally retarded daughter caused her to become a state-appointed advocate.

Litchfield's youngest daughter, Donna, now 48, was born with a variety of birth defects, including a hernia and holes in her heart. By the time Donna got to kindergarten, her family and doctors were aware that something else was wrong. She was eventually diagnosed with mental retardation.



Polly Litchfield

At the time, the family lived in Abington, which did not want to admit Donna to public school because she had to lie down to ease the strain on her

heart. The frustrated mother called the state department of education.

"I thought everybody was entitled to a public education. I was never so mad in my entire life. And I'd never called anybody at the state level before," Litchfield said.

The state required the Abington schools to tutor Donna, one hour a day, four days a week.

When Donna was sixteen, the family moved to Duxbury, into the custom-designed house on West Street where Litchfield still lives. On calling the

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Duxbury school department, Litchfield was delighted to discover that Donna was legally entitled to a public education until she reached the age of 22.

In 1976, Litchfield heard Sen. Ted Kennedy speak on television about a new organization, the Association for Retarded Children (now Citizens), or ARC. She called the local chapter, the Greater Plymouth ARC, and promptly became a volunteer on their board of directors.

She rose to the position of vice-president of the board by the time her husband accepted a job in New York state and moved the family there for ten years.

Upon their return to Duxbury, Litchfield again became politically active. Through volunteering on William Weld's gubernatorial campaign, she met the politician and asked him for a position on a mental retardation committee.

Shortly after Weld was elected, she was invited to serve on the department of mental retardation's statewide advisory council (SAC).

The feisty septuagenarian still sits on the SAC and serves as secretary, one of the Council's three officer positions.

The SAC advises the commissioner of mental retardation, Gerald Morrissey, on policy issues such as program needs, transportation and the budget. They meet the third Friday of every month except July. Between meetings, the council frequently has conference calls, sometimes as often as once a week.

The SAC comprises fifteen members, all volunteer, who are appointed by the head of the executive office of health and human services. Each appointment lasts three years.

When Litchfield was first appointed to the SAC, they met at Brandeis University in Waltham. But, "nobody really knew what the SAC was and what it did," she said.

In an effort to raise their profile with the area and regional boards of mental retardation,

the council began meeting in different towns each month, inviting the local boards to attend. They have traveled to communities such as Worcester, Springfield, Sudbury, Wrentham, and Somerville.

Litchfield believes the traveling meetings have been a huge success, both in terms of familiarizing the local activists with the SAC, and in terms of getting legislators to listen to them and help them.

"We are in touch with the legislators all the time, calling, emailing, visiting, whatever, and they really have to think long and hard before they make cuts in our budget," she said.

Right now, budget cuts are the biggest issue facing the SAC. Like organizations throughout the Commonwealth, the department of mental retardation is facing reduced finances and staff layoffs.

"It's really impacting us. That's why we're so busy right now," she said.

In addition to meetings and conference calls, Litchfield, the Whitman correspondent for the *Patriot Ledger* in the 1960s, still puts her journalism background to good use as the co-editor of the SAC newsletter.

Donna now lives in a residential care facility in Carver. Despite her mother's activism, she still had to wait on a list for eleven years until a residential care space became available in 1999. She works for Road to Responsibility in Pembroke.

Donna's most recent challenge has been a diagnosis of uterine cancer, for which she underwent surgery in early August. Her doctors are optimistic, and Litchfield says, "Donna's handling it wonderfully."

Litchfield also has two other daughters, Sandra and Julie, and five granddaughters. In the scant spare time when she is not busy with family or volunteer work, she enjoys painting. Her home's walls are covered with artworks completed over her long career. Lately, back problems have kept her away from her easel. "I haven't painted recently. That's what I want to get back to," she said.